Self-reflection as an assessment: have we reflected on why we are doing it?

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INTRODUCTION

The use of self-reflection as part of an assessment component, or a summative assessment, is becoming widely utilised, across many academic disciplines. In professional courses, such practices are long-established. There is a suggestion, however, that self-reflection may mean different things to different academic disciplines. What is often unclear, for example, is why such an assessment is included in the learning strategies of a given module. It could be part of the learning package to be completed by students - to encourage them to reflect upon why they have undertaken particular aspects of study and what has been achieved as a result. This is a type of reflective questioning. Alternatively, for undergraduate students, it could be about developing a particular skill for use in a future work environment - we all undertake some type of appraisal. Finally, for some academic colleagues, it may be about the perception of reducing the marking burden, through self-assessment and self-rating.

There are many things to consider here. Are the aims of these assessments explained clearly to the students? Can the students make the links between conducting self-reflection and applying it to another arena? Do the students take such assessments seriously? For many professional courses, such questions may elucidate much more positive answers. In this respect, the emphasis of this paper is upon our experiences in the social sciences.

This paper examines the issues around 'why' self-reflection may be a valuable part of assessment for both students and staff. It will include the case studies of two second-year modules in the Department of Politics, People and Place at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK, which have forms of self-reflection embedded in their assessment strategies. The self-reflection aspect of these modules' assessments comprises different modes and assessment weightings. There are variable experiences in these modules as to the value of these assessments.

This paper is not uncritical of the strategies undertaken in the modules with self-reflection as part of the assessment. The aim is to give careful consideration as to why such a form of assessment can be a valuable tool in developing a student's academic development and enhancing their potential employability, while also highlighting the drawbacks. Self-reflection is not the "all singing, all dancing" assessment that many may consider it to be. The context of the assessment needs to be explained clearly for the students to gain the maximum possible benefit from undertaking such an exercise. It could be questioned as to whether or not self-reflection is fit for purpose? To address this question, consideration must be given as to the purpose of the assessment.

BACKGROUND

There is a saying: "practice makes perfect". You keep practicing something until you get it right; until you perfect it. Yet this could be a fundamentally flawed process. What if you are practicing the wrong thing? What if the execution is wrong? You are doomed to make the same mistakes, and to reinforce those mistakes. Therefore, you need to think about what you are doing, how you are doing it and why you are doing it. You need to reflect.

Yet in teaching and assessing our students, are we giving them the room or the time to reflect? Do we reflect upon what we are doing and how or why we do it? Sadly, education is becoming more and more utilitarian. Undergraduate students appear to becoming more strategic learners. What is needed to be done to pass a module or to complete a programme of study? Why is there a need to learn something if it is not going to be assessed? If there is no

assessment for a particular component of learning, the more utilitarian students do not bother. They do not see the need to expend energies in that direction.

As an attempt to counter-balance this concern, the idea of self-reflection for students has been introduced in the social sciences. The issue around assessing such reflections will be explored later. The aim is to encourage students to consider what they are doing, and why. This ability to self-reflect is also a transferable skill; one that will be used in most workplaces and professions. Just consider the annual appraisal process. This self-reflection also provides the opportunity for lesson-learning – again, something that is built into the appraisal processes in many professions. It is a useful skill that we utilise in our profession: we evaluate our research, teaching or consultancies – we reflect upon what works, or not, and why. By building this skill into our teaching, we help students to develop skills that will be useful in their studies – for example, the skills to develop and improve undergraduate or postgraduate dissertations.

So, self-reflection is a useful tool or skill to develop - and it is built into a number of academic disciplines e.g. medicine, teaching, and social work. Yet the question remains as to the extent to which the students in the social sciences engage with this process, or understand why they are being asked to self-reflect.

Self-reflection is a component of assessment in the two undergraduate modules covered in this paper. Politics in Action is a second-year mandatory/optional undergraduate module which focuses on developing many of the skills that may be needed in the workplace. It is a project-based module, where the students have a choice of developing a team-based project to tackle sustainability issues at a local level. There have been different approaches on the module to scoping, planning and delivering the projects for 'real life learning'. For example, students have co-created their projects after pitching ideas and then voting on their preferences. Students have also been offered opportunities to work on 'live briefs' with 'DMU Local' and 'Leicester Urban Innovation Lab'. Universal Design for Learning is embedded in the learning, teaching and assessment of the module (see UDL at DMU). For example, students have a choice of five reflective assignment types in which they must take a personalised approach to: demonstrating their engagement, passion and criticality of political action; how their experiences and personal SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis meets the Quality Assurance Agency Subject Benchmark (qaa.ac.uk) graduate skills expectations; and describing and reflecting on their project work and 'real life learning'. Students therefore, as part of the single component of assessment, reflect upon the practices undertaken, both as an individual and as a team member, in the development and delivery of the project.

The Politics of the European Union is the other module covered here. It is an optional module, with two assessment components, one of which is a reflective piece. In this particular assignment, the students are involved in a simulation game, for which they prepare during the second term of study (alongside their usual classes). The simulation is a day-long event, where the students are expected to remain 'in character' as a delegate of an EU member state or the Commission. The reflective assignment asks the students to consider their role, the work of the team in both preparation and on the day, and to evaluate their performance. This could include, using hindsight, what could have been done better and explaining why.

It must also be emphasised that a high degree of support is given to the students – on both modules – in relation to how self-reflection can be undertaken, and the aims of doing so. The

task of self-reflection is explored in the module learning materials, with prompt questions for the students. In the Politics in Action module, this is overtly one of the Learning Outcomes. Within this module, students may also undertake a series of active learning tasks. These may be utilised to build up their skills and to develop their self-reflections throughout the academic year, capturing key points as they go along. It must be noted, however, few students take advantage of these reflection activities. Many of those who do not take advantage of such opportunities tend to get a little stuck later on in the year, when they try to complete the assignment in a similar manner to more conventional assignments – rushing them shortly before the deadline date. Such an approach does not work so well in the Politics in Action module.

In both modules, explanations are given in the workshops and online materials repeatedly in relation to how self-reflection could be undertaken. What is emphasised in these sessions is the importance of explaining 'why'. It is not about explaining 'what happened' (not that this is unimportant). Rather, it is about exploring the origins of the actions and the consequences of the actions. It is important to note, and this is explored a little in the literature review, that it is possible for a student to perform very badly in the exercises but pass with flying colours in the assessed self-reflection. The converse is also possible: to perform brilliantly but to describe events rather than reflecting in the assessment.

On the Politics in Action reflective learning is embedded in the curriculum in innovative approaches. For example, there are three sessions towards the end of the year where students engage with colleagues from the wider community at the University. One week is about 'presenting', disguised as 'talking about your project', another uses kinesthetics approaches such as creating a SWOLLAGE or using Lego Serious Play (see Compassion Play blog) and finally the careers team run a session about making use of experiences and learning for CVs and applications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

i – what is self-reflection?

There is a comprehensive literature on self-reflection, the most notable of which is Schön (1983), who is referenced in so many other sources. Schön raised an important distinction in self-reflection: that of reflection on action and reflection in action. The former is focused upon looking back on what has happened and considering the consequences of any given actions. Reflection in action is about giving such considerations while an event is ongoing. Reflection on action tends to be seen as much more time consuming and challenging (Schön, 1983; Chan et al, 2021). There are other ways of dividing reflection. For example, Mezirow (1998) presents different foci for reflection: narrative, systemic, organisational, etc. Yet an important point made by Schön (1983, 54) is to note how professionals are not always aware as to how they have learned to do things. It is in this area where there is a need for that reflection; to consider what and how something has been learned, and maybe to reflect upon how to do it better (see also Jarvis, 2008).

Yet this dichotomy only starts to scratch at the surface of reflection. There are many other concepts: self-reflection, self-assessment, self-evaluation, and reflective practice, to name but a few. On top of this, the adjective 'critical' could be placed in front of each of those terms. Reynolds (1999), for example, plays around with the term 'critical'. In relation to Management education he argues "critical reflection is seen as capable of challenging the unquestioned pursuit of economic expansion with its consequential inequalities in privilege" (Reynolds, 1999, 173). This tends to suggest the negative connotations of criticality; to find

fault and to correct. Similarly, the whole reflection process could just as easily be about developing an awareness which will lead to some form of critical analysis, resulting in change (Peltier et al, 2005). Yet such criticality could lead to a result of no change.

Van Beveren et al (2018) point out the need to consider the importance of reflection. They note how professional development is "one of the most cited educational purposes of reflection" (p4). Similarly, Wong (2016) points to reflective assignments being used as a means to assess and improve. Rogers (2001) explores the need to consider how to respond to situations or experiences. This could be inductive - through experiences - or deductive - a more academic approach.

ii – the skills and support to reflect successfully

Wong (2016) raises concerns about reflection. He points out that students may not know how to reflect. As an example of this problem, Wong discerns between students describing events as opposed to reflecting on events (building on Schön's refection on action). Students may not have the skills to develop the reflection required. Slepcevic-Zach and Stock (2018) have raised similar concerns about students being unclear on how to reflect. Peltier et al (2005) describe students as "reflection novices".

Thus, support needs to be given to students to enable them to develop these skills to reflect. The problem becomes about how to engage with the students in such a manner. Chan et al (2021) raised the perception by students of reflection being an additional burden, without the students necessarily understanding why such reflection needed to be undertaken. These student concerns are taken further by Chan et al, with students worrying about how teachers might grade such work. A consequence of this is that some students may not engage in any meaningful way in such reflection. In utilising reflective journals, for example, Wong (2016, 2) notes students may do the work "merely because they know they are going to be assessed on their reflections", the consequence of which is the students "are unlikely to become proficient as reflective practitioners". Harris (2008) highlights the need for personal reflection and that structured assignments encourages active engagement in reflection. Pavlovich et al (2009) note the importance of fostering reflective skills while acknowledging the biggest issue to be the grading of such reflective work. In this respect, it is the importance of the feedback to the students that matters. Such a point is recognised by others (Bubnys, 2020; Lew & Schmidt, 2011; Segers & Dochy, 2001).

An opposing perspective is presented by Huhtala et al (2020) when considering student reflections not being assessed. It raised concerns as to whether or not the students would engage. Slepcevic-Zach and Stock (2018) argue that e-portfolios and other forms of reflective work should not be assessed. There is the possibility – slight though it may be - of students 'gaming' the system - trying to write what they think they need to write to achieve a good grade, rather than actually reflecting on their practice or experiences. Consequently, Slepcevic-Zach and Stock (2018) suggest coaching should be used to encourage the students to develop the appropriate skills.

iii – do we know why we are including self-reflection?

Yet the concern here is the extent to which those who are encouraging or assessing the self-reflection understand what is involved. Hart et al (2011) note how assessments are developed to allow for an efficient marking process as a result of the pressures of time on staff members. There appears to be a perception that marking some form of reflective work is far less time

consuming than a more conventional form of assessment – and this is often a reason why some academics introduce such forms of assessment.

Aronson (2011) highlights the need to include reflection. She focuses on medical education, but her tips are transferable across disciplines. Firstly, and arguably most importantly, is the need to define 'reflection'. The need for change as a result of reflection - as noted by Reynolds (1999) and Peltier et al (2005) - is missing in her definition. "Critical reflection is the process of analyzing, questioning, and reframing an experience in order to make an assessment of it for the purpose of learning... and/or to improve practice" (Aronson, 2011, 200-201). From this perspective, ineffective reflection tends to be descriptive, as previously noted. Effective reflection, however, "requires time, effort and a willingness to question actions, underlying beliefs and values and to solicit different viewpoints" (p201).

There are a host of questions developed by Aronson (2011), including asking why you want students to undertake such reflection, as well as the structures and support needed to help students become effective in being reflective learners. There needs to be clear feedback for learners, and, of great importance, for those delivering the subject to reflect on the process of teaching reflection. Aronson (2011, 204) notes how "many educators have implemented exercises which elicit anecdotes rather than the sort of analysis, questioning, and reframing of experience likely to produce meaningful educational outcomes".

METHODOLOGY

As a supplement to this paper, students who had completed the self-reflection assignments in the previous two academic years were asked to submit their thoughts on the assignment. A very small sample of 20 students was identified (from a total of around 100 students). Some students had studied both modules but most only Politics in Action. After gaining ethical approval for this study, the students were asked to submit a 2-minute audio, reflecting upon the assignment(s). There were a series of prompt questions:

- how clear was what was being asked of you in undertaking this part of the assessment?
- how seriously did you treat this aspect of the assessment?
- what, if anything, did you draw from this assessment?
- to what extent, if at all, has this assessment impacted upon other parts of your studies, or upon your life as a whole?

The students were encouraged to go beyond these questions, but also to supplement their answers. It was acknowledged, for example, that the answer to the first prompt questions could be a monosyllabic answer. We asked them to explain their answer; to explore why?

The development of these prompt questions was included as part of the ethical approval that needed to be completed prior to asking the students to participate. This included preparing any support for students should any concerns arise. All materials submitted by the students were anonymised.

Of these approached to submit an audio, only a quarter responded. At best, this can give the briefest of indications of student perceptions of self-reflection. It is, in reality, a starting point for future surveys of student perceptions.

These responses have been supplemented by utilising the student reflective assignments. This has been to tease out any common themes or perspectives raised by students. No student work from the current academic year has been utilised.

From a staff perspective, which is examined briefly later in this paper, we are drawing from a workshop undertaken at a university Teaching and Learning conference, where colleagues gave their thoughts on the pros and cons of self-reflection. These comments may be anecdotal, but it provides an early opportunity to explore the state of play in utilising self-reflection as a form of assessment. Again, all comments from colleagues have been anonymised.

FINDINGS (i) – the student perspective

From the student reflections, some interesting points arose. For the most part, the respondents acknowledged the importance of undertaking some form of reflection. One response, however, noted how this was in hindsight. At the time, the suggestion from this respondent was that they did not take the self-reflection assignment seriously. In fairness to this respondent, there is a clear explanation as to why such an opinion was formed, and a suggestion is provided for staff members on how to remedy that situation.

Other respondents implicitly noted how they may not have fully understood the purpose of self-reflection at the time of undertaking the assignment. One respondent goes into some detail about a job application which required reflection on a specific problem. They had to identify a problem and explore how it could be remedied. This respondent noted particular skills that were derived from their assessed self-reflection experiences and how they applied them to their job application.

Another respondent took this issue of self-reflection further. This particular respondent explained how they related their self-reflection to past experiences and to potential future life events, and how the self-reflection gave them some of the tools to conduct such activity more effectively and efficiently. In this particular circumstance, this respondent was very active in their self-reflection. Although such self-reflection had never previously been undertaken, this respondent explained how they engaged in a very positive manner in self-reflection and how they applied these skills beyond their studies, and continued to do so.

What we tend to see in the assessed self-reflection of students is a clear dichotomy, which falls in line with the academic literature. There are those students who are “reflection novices”. They have rarely undertaken such work, and may not necessarily understand what they are supposed to do. Where there may be previous experiences of reflection, it could be they are being asked to reflect upon different aspects of study upon which they had never reflected. The extent to which the students engage with the assignment is also clear. The consequences are for such pieces of work to be narratives as opposed to pieces of self-reflection.

Conversely, there are those students who engage actively in self-reflection. They draw parallels with their past and current life experiences. Noting our diverse student population, some students delve into their personal lives and the opportunity to be able to study at a university, and being the first member of their family to do so. Some even write about how their future careers may be limited as a result of their ethnicity or gender, especially if striving to break through a glass ceiling. In the literature review, some sources highlighted the need for change. Some of our reflective pieces highlighted the barriers to that change and

how they might circumvent such barriers. Consideration is also given by some students to the university's "Universal Design for Learning", and the ways in which this has enhanced their opportunities to study and to develop their learning skills.

Where there are issues, and this again falls in line with the literature, is over gaming the self-reflection assessments. There are those students who try to second-guess what needs to be submitted in order to achieve a better grade. When reflecting upon the simulation exercise, it may be easier for students to 'game' the assignment – at least, if they have attended the simulation exercise. They examine what is required of the assignment in the module handbook and then construct a reflection narrative to meet those criteria. The difficulty here is if the student did not attend the simulation exercise; the extent to which they can reflect upon the actions and activities in the exercise is severely curtailed.

FINDINGS (ii) – the staff perspective

From the staff perspective, and this is in line with the literature, there is a clear need to ensure the self-reflection assignment is explained as thoroughly as possible to students. There are different ways in which this can be done, but they broadly link to the issue of employability. For the Politics in Action module, the STARR technique is embedded. The students are encouraged to develop these transferable skills:

Situation – Where were you?
Task – What did you have to do?
Actions – How did you do it?
Results – What were the results?
Reflect – What did you learn?

This leads to a final reflective question: would you do anything differently next time?

It is a matter of explaining why such an assignment is being undertaken. Added to this are the skills or tools to undertake such an assignment properly. This includes explaining to the students how to reflect. There are many different ways in which this can be done that can be linked to students' different life experiences – reflecting on the performance of a favourite sports team, or holiday resort, or a favourite piece of music. Get them to consider 'why'! It is about developing the basic building blocks for a thorough reflection.

Secondly, we need to consider what we want the students to achieve in completing such a form of assessment: why are they undertaking the assessment? Here is a need for us to reflect on this 'why'. In the case of our two modules, there are very clear and distinct reasons, and these differ between the two modules. For the Politics in Action module, it is about developing those transferable skills that students will need in the workplace.

There is a lot packed into this year long 15-credit module, much of it is in the hidden curriculum design. For example, students learn about project management, leadership and working in teams but experience; they start from the practice and are encouraged to engage and reflect on the theory afterwards. Students on the module have the opportunities to develop a learning community, 'friends for life' and confidence. On the module students critically explore the UN Sustainability Development Goads (SDGs), issues of sustainability and Responsible Project Management (see www.responsiblepm.com/). In terms of employability, students are encouraged to develop their storytelling around their (political) passions, strengths and experience.

For the Politics of the European Union module, the self-reflection is also about developing some of those transferable skills. The difference is in getting the students to consider their performance in a simulation exercise (and in the preparation). The students can reflect upon the role they have played, but also the preparation in advance of the performance. It does not matter if their performance is poor, it is the reflection upon why it was the case that matters.

In effect, the students are writing a school report of their performance, but explaining 'why'. They can also reflect upon knowledge gained from different perspectives – imagine a committed Brexiteer representing part of the Commission delegation in a simulation exercise, and having to stay 'in character'. Viewing issues from a different perspective, and then reflecting upon those experiences, can help a student to grow. Added to this, the students experience the possible tensions between different national delegations in a plenary event, as part of the simulation exercise. This broadens their understandings as to the operations of the EU and the pressures within the EU from such participation. The self-reflection provides an opportunity to give some consideration to such experiences.

Finally, some thought needs to be given as to why we include these assignments. There is a supposition, which is in the literature, that such assignments may be easier to mark than more conventional assignments, and this is why they are adopted. Our experiences differ significantly. Assessing reflective assignments when you have worked with students throughout a full academic year can be an emotional experience, especially when you have been vested in nurturing the students and helping them to grow in confidence. In some instances, you need a couple of attempts to mark a submission – initially looking for the strengths and weakness of the assignment based on the assessment criteria. You will also find gems (and criticism) in the assignments about you, your module and your approach to teaching. The positive comments can be a treat, but the negative reflections can be difficult to digest when you have a different lens on the situation. A detailed marking matrix has been created for the module in an attempt to apply some objectivity to an essentially subjective and highly personalised situation.

In the Politics of the European Union self-reflection, the emphasis is placed upon the students evaluating their own performance in a simulation exercise. As the assignment is marked anonymously – in that the marker has little way of knowing who has written what – this leaves the self-reflection to focus upon what the student could have done better. In this respect, it is about identifying the possible changes that could, in hindsight, have been undertaken to improve their performance. It is likely the students will identify the delegation in which they performed. This can give an indication as to whether they turned up and engaged on the day of the exercise. There is no way in which the marker can be aware of the preparation narrative presented by each student. Occasionally, there is an outlier, where one delegation member has a significantly different recollection of events to the rest of the delegation. In such circumstances, the question arises as to how the marker should judge the outlier. This can lead to a series of second and third guesses: is the outlier accurate in their narrative? Is it their perception of events that may be skewed (eg I was a decisive leader in my group, versus, our group leader could not make a decision)? Or, I undertook a lot of preparation but my group didn't want my work, versus, one group member did no preparation.

The obvious response here is to examine the assessment and marking criteria for the assignment. Yet these may not be overly prescriptive; they may be rather broad brush and flexible. This leaves the marker having to judge what is before them on merit.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing conclusions from such a paper is a little challenging. There is a wish list of things that we would like students to do in terms of completing self-reflection assignments. Conversely, there is a need to ensure students understand what is expected from them in completing such assignments AND how it will benefit them beyond their studies. From the feedback given by our students, this appears to be the larger concern: the extent to which the students understand why they are undertaking such assessments. It is clear that students, in hindsight, have understood the benefits to them of completing such an assignment – and this goes beyond realising a very good grade for their work. In hindsight, the students understood why such assessments were being utilised. In relation to this, students are able to learn how failure can become a success, but also how success may lead to failure – if, for example, they do not follow the task instructions.

The problem is, however, "in hindsight". They had the space of a year from completing the assignments to grow, to develop, and to understand. Maybe we need to build that space into the teaching; to encourage the students to develop these reflective skills in advance of any summative assessments. The problem is the students do not necessarily prioritise this work at the time. Using formative assessments does not necessarily work – as noted in some of the literature. If there is no clear 'reward' to an assignment, the students appear less reluctant to engage.

There is an important caveat here in relation to students appreciating and understanding the importance of such self-reflection. It is one of a range of different assessment types offered across any programme of study. For some students, they have been able to succeed in undertaking self-reflective assessments where they have been less successful elsewhere. This results in a boost to their confidence. Further, the groupwork aspect of the self-reflection – in each of the modules covered here – helps to develop a sense of community. Students are able to work together without it unduly impacting on their final grade. Should things go wrong, the importance in the self-reflection is to consider why this was the case.

As Aronson (2011) noted, there is a need to be time spent on developing reflective skills. There needs to be an awareness of what is involved – from both staff and students. Finally, there needs to be a willingness to question things. How this is done may require some form of input or guidance from practitioners. This may not be compatible with the learning preferences of some students, but there is a need to convey a clear image of how a critical reflective practitioner can function.

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